

# Humanism on... Medicine and the Human Body



Humanists campaigning for assisted dying

**This resource will help you to understand, explore and analyse how Humanists approach assisted dying, organ donation and embryos. This will be helpful for those studying the Higher, National 5 or National 4 RMPS unit Morality, Medicine and the Human Body.**

Other resources are available for teachers and students studying RME/RMPS in Scotland.

We also have trained volunteers who can visit your school and answer questions on Humanism. To find out more visit:  
**[www.humanism.scot/education](http://www.humanism.scot/education)**

We are always happy to answer questions for pupils who are completing their Added Value Unit or any other coursework and are looking for a Humanist response.

**Please email [admin@humanism.scot](mailto:admin@humanism.scot) your questions.**

## Key Learning Outcomes

Humanists are people who are not religious and look for real-life evidence to help answer moral questions.

Humanists support the right to die as a fundamental human right.

Humanists think it is important to respect human dignity and personal choice about one's life.

Humanists believe medical research and procedures should be based on evidence of benefits and drawbacks.

Humanists support an opt-out system of organ donation after death.

Humanists believe early embryos can't be considered 'a person'. Therefore, they think properly regulated research using embryos and abortions should be allowed.

This resource was developed by Humanist Society Scotland.

Higher/National 4&5 RMPS

# Who Are Humanists?

**Humanism is a non-religious viewpoint. Humanists are people who form their views on moral issues through gathering evidence.**

They use **reason and think critically** about what they find to make decisions. Humanists don't have a central "authority" on right and wrong – there is no sacred text or leader of Humanists. Instead Humanism is a **way of thinking rather than a religion**. Because of this, Humanists will sometimes disagree with each other over the right answer to key problems.

Humanists, however, share an understanding that our world is best understood through **science, observation and rational enquiry** rather than accepting supernatural explanations that cannot be tested. Humanists also share an understanding that our decisions should **not unfairly impact on others**. Humanists think we are all ultimately responsible for our actions and future.

## Understand

1. How does a Humanist differ in the way they would make a moral decision in comparison to people of religious groups you have studied?
2. What would a Humanist consider when making a moral decision?
3. How do you decide what is right and wrong?

## Explore

1. Research and find out some information about a famous Humanist. Create a poster with facts about their life. See if you can find a quote they have said about a moral issue.
2. Create a survey to ask your class how they decide what is right and wrong. You might ask them if religion plays a part in this process, although make sure you keep the answers anonymous. Put your findings together in a chart.

## Analyse

1. Create a table of similarities and differences between Humanists and Christians.
2. In a group/pair discuss the following statements a Humanist might make about how they make moral decisions. What does each one tell you about Humanists?
  - "We are all responsible for our own life, we can't expect someone else to make decisions for us."
  - "I look at a wide range of art, books, films as well as science to understand how life works."
  - "I find not knowing the answer to every single question inspiring and makes me want to discover more."



Members of Humanist Society Scotland campaigning for the law to change on same-sex marriage in 2014

# Assisted Dying

Everyone agrees that we all have the right to life, but does that mean we also have the right to die? Humanists think so. They believe individuals, in agreed circumstances, should be free to determine the time and conditions of their death.

**Human dignity** is an essential Humanist value. This includes acknowledging that quality of life is important. Humanists also think we should respect **personal autonomy**. This means people should have the right to make decisions about their own lives.

For example, imagine a person who has a terminal illness that will cause them extreme pain in their last months of life. This person may prefer to avoid suffering and end their life peacefully and on their own terms (listening to their favourite song, surrounded by their loved ones etc). Or they may opt for continued palliative care. Humanists think **this decision is up to the individual concerned**.

In order to protect vulnerable people, Humanists recognise that **safeguards** are necessary. People who choose to end their own life must do so **voluntarily** (free of pressure) and be **fully informed** of their options.

In Scotland, Humanist Society Scotland has been (and continues to be) at the centre of campaign efforts to **change the law** and allow people to access assisted dying.

## Humanist Profiles

**Name:** Terry Pratchett

**Occupation:** Fantasy Novel Author



“I got involved in the debate surrounding ‘assisted death’ after taking a long and informed look at my future as someone with Alzheimer’s. I vowed that rather than let Alzheimer’s take me, I would take it. I would live my life as ever to the full and die, before the disease mounted its last attack, in my own home, in a chair on the lawn. And with Thomas Tallis on my iPod, I would shake hands with Death. If I knew that I could die at any time I wanted, then suddenly every day would be as precious as a million pounds. If I knew that I could die, I would live. My life, my death, my choice.”



Humanists support assisted dying

## Understand

1. Which Humanist values are most important when considering assisted dying?
2. Humanists think there’s no intrinsic moral difference between passive euthanasia (allowing someone to die) and assisted dying (assisting someone to end their life). Do you agree?

## Explore

1. Research which countries allow some form of medically assisted dying. What are the main differences between them?
2. Look at the profile of Terry Pratchett. Can you find other information about him? What do you think he meant when he said, “If I knew that I could die, I would live”?

## Analyse

1. Give the main reasons why some people oppose assisted dying, then think how a Humanist may respond to their concerns.

# Organ Donation

Humanists support medical advances that improve health and wellbeing. They also think people's choices about their own bodies should be respected. The Humanist take on organ donation is a good example of both principles in action.

Altruistic donation by the living is a very personal choice. Donors should be **informed** of the risks, and make their decision **free from pressure and manipulation**.

Donation by the deceased is slightly more complicated. Traditionally, there has been an opt-in system in Scotland. This means that people who wanted to donate their organs after dying had to register their wishes in advance. However, many people who have no objections to donation may forget to register or simply don't know that they have to. Furthermore, family members were allowed to oppose the donation, overriding the will of the deceased. Humanists **think this is not acceptable**.

Humanist Society Scotland has campaigned for an **opt-out system**. Such a system assumes that **people consent to donation by default**. If they don't, they are of course allowed to opt out. Whatever they choose, their decision should be honoured. This system would increase the number of donated organs, thus **saving more lives**, while respecting **personal autonomy**. A new law introducing an opt-out system was passed by the Scottish Parliament in 2019.

## Humanist Profiles

**Name:** Gloria Steinem

**Occupation:** Journalist and political activist



“I think we need a legal principle like bodily integrity which recognizes that, though the state may jail us, they can't insist on injections or tests... Our skin needs to be the line of defence between our own dignity and will, and any outside force. Every person has the right to control their own bodies from the skin in.



Humanists support an opt-out system of organ donation

## Understand

1. In your opinion, what are the main advantages of an opt-out organ donation system?
2. Imagine that a person who opted out of organ donation has died. Someone argues that their organs should be donated, even though they didn't want to: the human lives that could be saved are more important than the wishes of a dead person. Would a Humanist agree with this reasoning? Do you agree?

## Explore

1. Look up the definitions of:
  - a) paired donation
  - b) directed donation
  - c) non-directed donation.

## Analyse

1. Read the profile of Gloria Steinem. She argues that individuals' bodies shouldn't be invaded against their will. Do you think her view is also relevant for organ donation? In what ways?

# Embryos

Humanists think we should look at the evidence when forming our opinions. We know that at the early stages of its development an embryo doesn't have a brain. This means that it doesn't have self-awareness, and it cannot feel pain or emotion. A Humanist would say that an embryo is a fertilised human egg with the capacity to develop into a person, but it is not one yet.

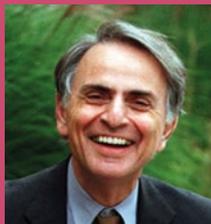
Stem cell therapy offers hope of treatment and cure for severe illnesses. Therefore, Humanists think using **embryos in stem cell research is acceptable**. A Humanist approach would argue that use of embryos is morally justified if the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. A Humanist would reason that embryos aren't people and can't suffer, while their use can **save and improve many human lives**.

Humanists also support a woman's right to have a safe and legal abortion. Humanist groups have actively supported 'pro-choice' campaigns all around the world. Indeed, **personal choice is very important for Humanists**, especially when it concerns one's own body. Humanists would argue that forcing someone to be pregnant against their wishes is an unacceptable violation of their **bodily autonomy**. There is also evidence that making abortion illegal doesn't end abortion. It just makes it less safe, as women put their health at risk accessing unsafe terminations. A Humanist would say this evidence shows that making abortion illegal only increases human suffering.

## Humanist Profiles

**Name:** Carl Sagan

**Occupation:** Astronomer



“Life does not begin at conception: It is an unbroken chain that stretches back nearly to the origin of the Earth, 4.6 billion years ago. Nor does human life begin at conception: It is an unbroken chain dating back to the origin of our species, hundreds of thousands of years ago. Every human sperm and egg is alive. They are not human beings, of course. It could be argued that neither is a fertilized egg.”



Humanists in Scotland at an abortion rights rally

## Understand

1. Would you agree that embryos are not “people”? What do you think makes a person a person?
2. How are the moral arguments over abortion similar to those on use of embryos in science?

## Explore

1. Read the profile of Carl Sagan. Can you find more about his life and achievements?
2. What's your interpretation of Sagan's quote? Why do you think he's linking human evolution to embryo development?

## Analyse

1. Pick a religion that does not support abortion or stem cell research. Give three reasons why, then think how a Humanist may disagree with them.
2. See if you can find some medical advances made using stem cells. Does this make you more likely to support the use of embryos in science?

# Value of life

Humanists believe the value of our lives is extremely important. Humanists believe that this life is the only one that we have and therefore protecting life is important.

A Humanist might argue that they place more value on their life here and now than people of other beliefs who think there will be an afterlife. Humanists **do not believe in God** and so don't agree with views about 'sacredness of life'. They **do not accept that there is a divine being** who 'owns' us or that we owe loyalty to.

Humanists do, however, support an individual's right to die. A key concept in Humanism is an individual's right to control their own body. The key belief for Humanists is that **an individual should have personal autonomy and choice**. Humanists would oppose death without consent, for example. Humanists believe that having the right to die is the **most compassionate approach**, and ending life to alleviate pain and suffering is better than prolonging pain and suffering – if that is what the person decides for themselves.

Humanists also argue that the **'sanctity of life' argument is not consistently upheld** by those who promote it. For example, some people who argue sanctity in the case of abortion or assisted dying have no issue with supporting capital punishment or taking life during war.

## Evidence in action

The Scottish Parliament has considered arguments on the right to die twice. These were led by former MSP Margo MacDonald, firstly in 2010 and then again in 2013. After Margo died in 2014 another MSP, Patrick Harvie, took over the second attempt to change the law.

Because this issue was considered a 'matter of conscience' MSPs were not instructed by their political parties to vote in a certain way as they usually would be in debates. This is commonly called giving parliament a 'free vote'. This same approach was taken on the debate around same-sex marriage.

In 2010 MSPs voted 85 to 16 against changing the law. In 2013 MSPs voted 82 to 36 against changing the law. Humanists continue to argue for a change in the law.



## Understand

1. Give two reasons a Humanist might oppose the 'sanctity of life' argument.
2. What might a Humanist say when asked about the 'right to die' argument?

## Explore

1. Compare a Humanist view on 'sanctity of life' to that of a religion you have studied. How do they differ? Do they agree on anything?
2. Write an argument in favour of the 'sanctity of life' argument and write one opposed to the argument.

## Analyse

1. Read the Evidence in Action section. Can you find out more about Margo MacDonald? Can you find out other issues where MSPs or MPs have been given a 'free vote' on a 'matter of conscience'?
2. In a small group discuss the right to die. Give your own reflection on the issue and listen to others' points of view.
3. In your groups appoint two people who will play the roles of MSPs: One who is in favour of changing the law on the right to die and one against. What would they say? Can you write a short speech from both points of view?